

On Saturday, February 12, I attended the 24th Annual Black History Month Breakfast, held in Clinton this year, that I have hosted every year since I was elected to Congress to recognize the critical role African Americans have played in the founding and developing of our country. I was pleased to be joined by Senator Paul Sarbanes, and our keynote speaker Tony Brown, host of Tony Brown's Journal on PBS, as well as more than 450 leaders from throughout the 5th Congressional District to pay tribute to Black History Month and to celebrate the theme, Peace, Unity, Solidarity and Hope.

For the past 24 years, this breakfast has provided our community with an opportunity to discuss how our shared history frames our future. In sharing in this morning of friendship and fellowship, we together celebrate the contributions of African Americans whose hearts are not hardened by the toils of history, but who are committed to building families and communities, and a better nation. We remember not just our heroes such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Frederick Douglass and former Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, but also the extraordinary lives of ordinary people who have helped build our great nation.

With the indomitable spirit of James H. Taylor, the first African American judge in Prince George's history, and new leaders such as Edith Patterson, the first African American member to serve on the Board of Charles County Commissioners, African Americans in our community are making progress. And, nationally, more African American families have joined the middle class and the number of black businesses is increasing.

This year, we will commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Niagara Movement. Thanks to the vision of W.E. B. Dubois, the Niagara Movement set a proactive and uncompromising agenda for achieving true equality for African Americans. The Niagara Movement was the forerunner of the NAACP, which was founded a few years later. In spite of this progress, we still have a long way to go.

Black History Month provides our nation with the opportunity to honor the rich history of a community that has overcome so much and recommit ourselves to ensuring that our nation continues to make progress to fulfill the vision Thomas Jefferson penned in the Declaration of Independence; that we are a nation dedicated to the equality of all individuals. We can do this by reversing the devastating fiscal policies being pursued by this Administration and creating jobs, but also by addressing the needs of our educational system.

In recognition of the unspeakable hardship and indefensible prejudice that African Americans

have had to overcome throughout history, this year, as in past years, at the beginning of March, I will travel to Alabama with my friend, Rep. John Lewis, to join in commemorating the infamous “Bloody Sunday” civil rights march in which he participated in Selma, Alabama on March 7, 1965.

On “Bloody Sunday,” some 600 civil rights marchers protesting the many methods employed in the South to prevent African Americans from registering to vote headed east out of Selma on U.S. Route 80. They got only as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge six blocks away, where state and local lawmen attacked them with billy clubs, bullwhips, rubber hoses wrapped with barbed wire and tear gas and drove them back into Selma.

Footage of “Bloody Sunday” was shown on television, causing a national outcry. Several days later, President Lyndon Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress to propose what would become the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The legislation was signed into law 40 year ago on August 6, 1965, and is widely credited with allowing African Americans the right to register to vote.

Furthermore, in 1996 the Selma-to-Montgomery National Historic Trail was created by Congress under the National Trails System Act of 1968. The Alabama trail is an original route of national significance in American history.

The bravery of these men and women who risked their lives to guarantee themselves, their families and all Americans the right to vote, serves to remind us of the debt that many citizens have paid for our civil liberties today.

The pilgrimage I will take to Selma is an uplifting reminder that men and women of courage and character can change hearts and change a nation. It is vital to recall our past as we strive to improve our future.

While we commemorate the impressive landmarks of Black History, I think we should also take a sobering look at the issues that continue to face our nation and minority families. We must make sensible choices in choosing domestic priorities, and we can do this in the spirit of the Niagara Movement while rededicating ourselves to civil, social and economic justice and equality for all Americans.